THE LOST CHILDREN

a horror anthology

JADE ANG

THE LOST CHILDREN

A HORROR ANTHOLOGY

JADYN ANG

COPYRIGHT © 2022

THE LOST CHILDREN:
A HORROR ANTHOLOGY

Stories

While You Are Sleeping
Child's Play
Silent Night
Stolen
Learning to Survive
The Neighbours
Bedtime Monsters
Cemetery Gates
The Lost Children

While You Are Sleeping

While you are sleeping, do listen close
For out of the box, the little boy goes
Of the dreams where you hide, little Jack knows
Dragging the spring that he has for his toes

While you are sleeping, beware of the man
Who used to drum for the marching band
But time had chipped and ripped his hands
Now the old soldier seeks some limbs for rent

While you are sleeping, the dolls will wake
Their glass eyes blink on faces dead
Small feet tiptoe up to your bed
Plastic fingers trace your head

While you are sleeping, the small soldiers prowl
Along to the song box's gentle lull
The dolls' commands they dare not revile
With hunting knives, they unbolt your skull

While you are sleeping, they all awake
Of you a plaything they will make
But on your watch, they'll have to play dead
So if you can…

Try to stay up late.

Child's Play

Few things made young Luciana happier than to watch the world go by from her bedroom window. There, she could look down at the rocky pavement and imagine her tiny feet upon gravel. She could watch the blue skies above turn dark as the hours passed.

On lucky days, she could catch a glimpse of lovely birds weaving through the fluffy clouds, which always made her smile. Sometimes, she would even peer into her neighbour's home out of curiosity, even if her father forbade her to.

"Leave the poor woman alone, Lucy," her father would tell her. "What would she think if she saw you spying on her?

"I'd be careful, I promise."

Her father's stern façade vanished as he said with a chuckle and a grin, "Ah, that's not what I meant, you cheeky monkey. Grown-ups like their privacy. She wouldn't be too pleased to see you looking in on her."

Luciana would laugh it off. But just as soon as her father had tucked her in and gone, she would get up, go back to the window, and watch the woman in the opposite house, where she never once left.

No one knew much about the woman, except that she had lived on the street longer than anyone else did.

Luciana knew a little more from what she saw. For instance, a man of her father's age brought food up to her door three times a day, at eight in the morning, twelve in the noon, and seven in the evening.

In the hours between, the old woman had the company of her young grandson. The small child, who has to be no more than six, would sit in the rattan chair next to her bed. Every night, she would sing him to sleep.

Luciana never knew the exact words to the song. All she could hear was the faint hum of a mournful tune in the distance, consonant with the grim sorrow that she saw on the woman's face. She listened and never forgot a note to it.

One wintry morning, Luciana finally turned five. She wondered what she would get this year.

When she was four and no longer enjoyed playing pretend with porcelain dolls, a doll was what her father had gotten her. Still, she allowed herself a gleeful giggle at the gift and in her heart, hoped for better next year.

She remembered how her father had tried not to let his disappointment show. The little girl had grown too fast for him to catch on, he had lamented to his mother when he thought she was out of earshot.

And so for her fifth birthday party, her father was set on getting her a gift that she would truly love. He recalled seeing his precocious daughter look at the stars every night and knew he had it right this time.

He was at least half right. Luciana had loved a reason to look out the windows, though it wasn't just for the stars.

He had never seen a smile wider than hers when she tore the gift wrap open and saw the antique telescope. Even it was far too large for her stature. He laughed when she jumped into his arms, wondering when she would get too big, too soon.

Had his gift shopping gone wrong again, the small family would have been delighted enough by her stepmother's culinary magic. Just the night before, she had baked a cake that proved too massive for three. They decided to share it with the neighbours, who cheered at a reason for celebration.

All of the guests who were invited came to the birthday party, except for one. The ancient woman was as aloof as she looked, ignoring the doorbell as she did the small invitation note. The young man whom Luciana saw with her, however, showed up.

“The name’s Dave,” the man said as he shook her father’s hand at the door, “Thanks for the invite, I saw it by my mother’s door. I’m sorry that she couldn’t be here. Hope you don’t mind that I came by instead.”

“Not at all, it’s nice of you to come. I see that you bear gifts for my little girl too.”

“Well, I couldn’t come by empty-handed.”

Just as Luciana peeked out from behind her father, Dave feigned surprise. He revealed his bear-shaped gift, “I suppose this is for you, young lady.”

Poorly wrapped as it was, Luciana blushed with a soft *thank you*. She saw his eyes gleam with tears. She could not understand why he was sad when he had seemed happy just a second ago.

Her father must have thought the same for he was asking whether Dave was alright, offering him a cup of tea for comfort. To which, Dave wiped away his tears, shook his head, and apologised. He explained to the puzzled faces around him, “It’s just that… She reminds me of my Freddie.”

At the name, Luciana thought of the little boy in the rattan chair whom she had seen by the woman’s bed.

That must be him!

Her voice was bright as she shouted with excitement, “Is that his name? Freddie?”

Dave did not answer. Luciana could almost swear the man was looking away, as though fearful.

“I… I’ve got to go,” he mumbled and left.

“What a strange man, wasn’t he,” Father said to Luciana before taking her by the hand.

She nodded, though strange wasn’t the word she would used to describe that sad man. She let her father lead her towards her Aunt, who had

travelled far for her party. It did not take long before the incident slipped their minds.

The rest of the party was as lovely as Luciana had ever dreamt. Her excitement lasted through the day and never quite left in the middle of the night.

Her pounding heart kept her up even at the stroke of midnight, though she pretended to be sound asleep when her father had looked in one last time. Soon as he was gone, she crawled out of bed and stacked books by the window.

She tiptoed on the book pile and looked through her new telescope, hoping that the night sky could calm her. Just as she was admiring the beauty of the stars, her thoughts turned to Dave.

She reminds me of my Freddie.

What had that meant? She remembered his eyes brimming with tears and wondered why her mention of Freddie had upset him so. Shouldn’t all fathers love their children dearly and brighten at the sound of their names?

Perhaps that grief had been for his mother, who couldn’t leave her bed, Luciana thought. That must be hard on them both, not being able to spend time with each other beyond the walls.

She wondered why they no longer lived together as other families do. Doesn't she ever get lonely in that big old house? Her racing thoughts made her more awake than before.

She pulled herself away from the telescope lens and gazed into the window opposite hers. She began to wonder aloud, "Who are you? What kind of life have you led before? How many lives had you lived?"

The old woman simply slept in her bed without a clue to offer. Her grandson – Freddie - sat in his chair, just as they always did. Under the moonlight, his rosy cheeks lit up his olive skin. Luciana thought him quite handsome. She blushed, her face turning an apple shade of red.

As she let her thoughts run more, her decision was set in stone. At the age of five and a day, Luciana decided that she would visit the old lady and her little boy in secret, if only to learn more about what others would not.

The next night, the familiar lullaby came right on time. The old woman sang it in her haunting voice, ill with profound loneliness. The melancholy that it conjured was unsettling. But that only strengthened Luciana's will and curious heart.

Socks on, she tiptoed down the stairs in her nightdress. She peeped into her parents' bedroom before she left. Her stepmother was sound asleep, lying right next to her snoring father. She wondered if they would chide her in the morning, but decided not to worry about tomorrow.

I'm sorry! She apologised for her mischief. *It's much easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission*, she once read in a book. She kissed them in her thoughts, and was soon out the door.

The lure of the beautiful melody was louder now and it kept drawing her in.

Up close, the old lady's house looked daunting in both size and history. Luciana could see the fresh coat of paint, flaking off the walls. Plucking all the courage she could find, she remembered her reason for visiting and knocked on the big, red door.

It creaked ajar, its silence inviting. The child did not expect that at all. Nevertheless, she accepted.

The house looked similar to her home, only that the furniture was much older, as though unused for years. There were dirt and holes everywhere – on the chairs, on the dining table with a broken leg, on the oil paintings on the cracked walls.

She shivered at the sight, unacquainted with such poverty, desolation, and the resultant pity that sat in her heart.

The song echoed louder, beckoning her to move on. There was an urgency to the call of the melody. Luciana felt a tear roll down her cheek. Pain rose in her chest from fear. A lump formed in her throat. She realised her mistake, coming here alone without dear Father to protect her.

But the music tempted and attempted to comfort her nerves. Luciana somehow found the courage to keep moving, now up the stairs towards the room that she knew well enough.

Edging closer to the door, she kept her breaths shallow for the room was more putrid than wet paint. It was too dark and too cold.

Sorry, Father, she whispered in her mind. *I should've listened.*

Too late it was. She had come too far to turn back. She hardened her resolve and moved past the door.

There, she saw what she wanted to see.

Freddie!

The boy sat in his rattan chair, his face lit by a nearby lamp, unmoving and quiet. His skin was paler than it had looked from the distance, his cheeks a darker crimson.

For a while, Luciana was delighted to meet another child of her age in the flesh. There never were many children in her quiet neighbourhood.

"Hello!" she ran towards him and said, "I'm Luciana. You can call me Lucy like my father does."

But the boy did not tell her his name in return.

Perhaps he couldn't hear me.

She cleared her throat and repeated herself as loud as she could. All he did was to stare ahead, into her, or perhaps past her. His icy gaze frightened her.

She refused to be disheartened and decided to edge closer to him while forcing a smile upon her quivering lips.

“You’re Freddie, aren’t you?”

Now, he had to have heard her! She was mere inches away from the boy.

It was only then that she realised where the pungent smell had come from. The stench was not all she noticed. Her eyes followed the many threads that were woven in and out of his skin.

She gasped, unsure of what to think.

She barely managed to whisper the words in her thoughts, "What… happened to you?"

Despite her question, she had a good guess on what she was looking at. She had seen more than a few preserved creatures in the local museum’s cabinet of curiosities. Their glassy eyes and glossy skin had looked exactly like Freddie’s.

The boy stared at Luciana with life yet quietude, as though he was glad that she finally understood. All the questions about the woman had gone from her head and now turned to Freddie.

"Who were you?" she said. "And how did you... die?”

She trembled at the thought of him being dead… but alive.

All this while, the grey old woman was watching the child. Luciana could feel her empty stare weigh heavy on her. There, she wanted nothing more than to apologise and run back home to her beloved parents.

She was about to turn and leave, so she could tell her father the horrors that she had seen. She already felt her growing exasperation that would come with his eventual disbelief. Perhaps she could then bring him to Dave, who would have to tell them the truth about his boy, wouldn’t he?

But the woman's humming stopped Luciana in her thoughts and tracks. The song had a hold of her, soaring and commanding her to sing along, calling out to her to join in.

Luciana could no longer run, no matter how hard she tried. Her feet felt like lead, like they no longer belonged to her.

This time, she could hear every word of the song clearly as she stood rooted to the ground. She sobbed in terror as the odd melody swirled through the air:

Stick needles and pins
In a doll made of skin
He stares right back
With revulsion within

Look into his eyes
And see that they have died
Oh catatonic, oh catatonic
My little Frederik

Silence deadened the air when the song – Freddie's story – finally came to an abrupt end.

The odd couple only looked at Luciana and she, back at them. She saw how fragile they were, their skin cracked and brittle, and almost let her guard down.

Almost. Even at the tender age of five, she saw the menace in their eyes and just knew. They were never going to let her go. She was never going to see her beloved father and mother again.

"My dear Frederik, my friend," she begged and begged as she shivered in fear. "Please let me leave. Father and Mother will be worried about me. Let me go and I promise I won't tell a soul."

Neither answered her pleas. The song only started anew. That was in a way, she realised, an answer that declined her wish to depart.

Her knees buckled as she fell to the wooden floor. She trembled as she cried with everything left in her, not merely for the bruises she suffered.

There, she finally saw it – what the old woman had always seen and had no one to tell. The boy wanted her to know everything. Words were floating from his tight-sewn lips towards her mind, like feathers in the wind.

There's no point in running
It's just you and me
No point in screaming
So just let it be

Leave your dear Mother
So she'll find another
A catatonic, a catatonic
My only Frederick

Oh Freddie, oh Freddie
If only you knew better
But you know and I know
That none of that mattered...

Silent Night

This Christmas, there were no stars in the skies. There were no lights or fir trees tucked in the corners of lively homes by warm fireplaces. On the blanket of snow where she stood, Mona pulled her mother's coat over her sweater.

Heavy as the coat was for her tiny body, she was glad to have brought it along. One could very well freeze solid in this weather without which, even if the snow had stopped falling for a long time.

With its last bit of generosity, the cold wind gave off a gentle albeit lingering breeze. Then, the air was at rest again. Dark clouds gathered and roared in their moody tantrum, then unleashed a sleuth of heat that fell with grey rain.

Mona let the rain touch her fingers. Every drop pulverised into a darker shade of ash. She swabbed her dirty finger and left a light smear on her white sweater.

It had turned slightly beige, she realised. She frowned, wishing she had some clean water to wash it with. But she knew that even if she did, she wouldn’t waste it on washing anything at all. She would drink every last drop of it if only to survive. That is even if the sweater was the most precious thing she had ever owned.

It was a Christmas present, as was her thin silver necklace. The latter was what she had gotten from her mother on the same Christmas Day last year – for her birthday that was always forgotten in favour of the festivities. She still wore it around her neck, even though the locket had fallen off when she ran too quickly once.

Mona distracted herself from the thought of her lost locket and the only photo she had of her mother. She had her, as a baby, in her arms. Tears welled in her eyes as she began to dance around some dried firewood, singing a melody that she loved.

"Bright morning stars are rising..."

She sang out the first few notes in tune. Her wandering mind made up the rest of the music. She could not remember how the song went, even its words.

"They have gone to heaven a shouting."

God, she wished she knew the rest of the lyric to the beautiful song. It was one of few bright memories she had of her endearing mother. But what little memory she had left of her was gradually fading away. Time stole that voice that had comforted the young girl every night during the good days.

So Mona kept humming every day, hoping that she will never forget that morsel of recollection, which kept her alive.
It kept her hope alive.

The more Mona thought, the lonelier she felt. It was supposed to be Christmas. Even the most distant families would come together, just for a day in the year.

But her mother was gone. So was everyone else. There were no children around to dance with her. No carolers sang. Not an animal whispered in the dead of the night.

Only the feeble snowman Mona herself had built, watched over her. That too would melt in time to come.

She cursed for there was no one around to hear her. She knew exactly what she had done wrong to deserve this. She had stayed in the basement and hid till there was nothing but silence. She should’ve had more courage to disobey her mother – to protect her. Now, she would never see her again.

If only she could turn back time just so she could fix her mistakes and not be alone again.

Her humming grew softer before she fell back onto the icy blanket of grey snow. Inside her little heart, there was a sliver of hope that her mother could still be alive. She never did see her die. Those charred bodies could've been anyone. How could she have recognised those faces, their eyes gored and lips torn by dirty bullets?

Perhaps someone else out there had survived too and would find her one day. She couldn't have been the only one hiding. He or she would lie down beside her and join her in chorus, reminding her of what it is like to not be lonely again.

Mona fell asleep for a while. When she woke, she was shivering so much she could no longer sing, even in her head. She got on her feet and headed back to find shelter from the cold.

The town was small. It was a vindictive one too, fighting dust and bones resting quietly on its ground.

Walls unleashed a few bricks and rubble as the child walked by, even if she kept her footsteps light. There was much anger left behind. There was something else too. Mona felt every bit of the suffocating despair of those left in the lurch. It made her uncomfortable, forcing tears back into her eyes.

She wiped them off and decided to search for better memories. They came to her as she saw the remnants of an old supermarket where she and Mum frequented. This was where she would stop to beg for candy when she had been much younger.

"I won't ask for anything else, I promise!" she would lie.

Her mother would shake her head, trying to hide her smile, "Lies would take those teeth from you, and so will candy."

At the warning, the child imagined her sore jaw and started to bawl. The uncomplaining and patient woman only laughed and ruffled Mona's hair.

The simple act worked like magic. She could never fail to calm her little girl, no matter how irrational the child seemed. In the end, their bond was always enough.

The rare bit of recollection went away, refusing to linger. In the silence, Mona heard her stomach growl, diverting her wavering attention to her need for food that she had not had in a day. Oh, how she missed Mum’s warm lunches and dinner feasts.

She imagined the aisles of ready-to-eat meals, soft drink cans, and juice bottles beyond the rubble. She wondered if she could crawl through the collapsed entrance before the debris could crush her flat. She could probably fit fine; her small body had only grown scrawnier with time.

But she might not be fast enough. She was never a quick crawler. Feeling weakness brought on by hunger, she decided against the poor plan. Perhaps she would risk it one day when she eventually ran out of supplies for good.

She hurried on home, passing by rusty carts parked on the sidewalk. The homeless – what was left of them – rested on her path and the park benches, preserved in the frosty cold.

Dead rats lined the grimy sewers. The chill concealed most of the smell, leaving just a slight trace of the pungent decay. She sneezed. Brushing her shivers off, she walked on, as though none of it had bothered her at all.

Bricks were left in place of where the houses used to stand tall. Road signs warning of sharp turns and construction work endured in the wake of destruction, despite meaning nothing anymore.

Mona walked past her own home, only just recognising it from the sign she had helped put up. Veins twirled around the words 'home sweet home', tucked neatly among rocks.

“Is there anyone home?” she shouted.

Home!, her own voice shouted back at her.

Mum, she whispered, too soft for anyone to hear.

She recalled better days when the echoes had been real voices, not just hers. She had a real fireplace, not firewood that she could no longer light. She could remember every bit of the warmth that came from beyond tangible flames.

There in her memories were Mum and Dad in flesh and blood, people whom she could embrace and share her days with, the good and the bad.

Yes, even him, Dad, the man who chose to leave them in the lurch when he found somebody new. That was before everything had happened. She could never hate someone she barely knew and sometimes, even wondered if he might've survived like she did.

She held onto the vague images in her not so distant past as she wandered around the rubble. Circling around the scraps twice, she grew weary.

"Let's go, Mona," she said to herself.

Let go.

She walked on. Up ahead was an old bridge that led to the other side. There was a massive hole in the middle, though one might be able to make it past what was left of it if they were light and careful in their steps.

Still, she never found enough courage to venture beyond the town she had grown up in all her life. She was fine where she was, where she knew. So as always, her day adventure led her back into the Church.

Mona cleared her throat and yelled with all her might, "Hello!"

The Church echoed back her greeting. She smiled at the welcome and looked around. The dust had started to collect in the past months for when Mona had been its sole inhabitant.

Avoiding the concrete pile in the middle, she edged towards the front pew,

the only pew left intact in the blast. She sat down, bowed her head, and crossed her fingers together, as she had seen people do to seek comfort.

A flap of wings pierced through the silence.

Mona looked up, startled by the noise. It brought life she yearned, yet disturbed the tranquillity she had grown used to. Her eyes wandered and landed on where the sound came from.

Even in the dim place, the insect's red body shimmered as it flew through the window. It looked almost beautiful. Mona closed her eyes and listened to its buzz in the air. The beetle hummed and fluttered. The noise grew louder and louder.

It reminded her of the familiar drone of big tanks and the flurry of shells putting holes in the walls.

Bam!

She screamed, mimicking the screams she recalled having heard. Then, she stomped her feet on the ground as hard as she could.

Help me!
Echoes bounced off the walls, making quite a racket that might wake the dead. She could almost feel the impact of the floor caving in from history's blast.

The little girl opened her eyes. She found the holes exactly where they had been in her memories. Her eyes continued to follow the beetle, which was still circling around her. Up close, she could almost see dull stains of ash grey on its back. Like the ones on her sweater.

Mona seized the beetle in her hand, feeling its wings flail in her fist with a frantic instinct to survive. She shut her eyes and released it down her throat.

Her tiny teeth caught it. They ground the poor animal into crumbs in seconds. Bitterness stuck at the back of her tongue, as she tried to wash it

down with saliva to no avail.

Her stomach still growled, demanding more food. She grimaced at her growing hunger that was gradually turning into relentless pangs. She needed meat.

Craning her neck, she looked behind her.

Her food sat in solemn quietude on the run-down pews at the rear. Their hands were still put together and their skin, uneven. Most eyes were closed. Some were held wide open by ice. A few had visible bullets shells sticking out like spines. Shattered wood surrounded their shoes that had worn down to shreds.

Chunks of flesh clung onto the pews. Every dish had been partly chomped on, leaving bones jutting like the splinters from the sides of the pews. Even so, there were still decent meals left on the bodies.

She stood up and walked over to the last row, only barely touched. Her little fingers dug into the ice, then the skin of a little girl not much older than she was.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised as she always did. “I really am.”

It had never once felt right, no matter how many times she had done it. She never felt like she deserved life more than anyone. Before all of it happened, she hadn’t even gone to church or believed in God. At this moment, she believed the punishment she was enduring could only be called divine.

Her red flesh peeked out as Mona removed her fingers and licked them clean.

“Mmm…”

It was awfully bitter. What was left of her food was rotting, even in the cold.

Mona looked down at her analogue watch. She was five years, six hours and 45 minutes old. She wondered how long more she can survive.

Stolen

Stolen from their cots one night in 1989, five involuntary orphans grew up knowing of neither their birth parents nor the world outside. Instead, they were raised by a horde of nameless Guardians in a mansion that had everything they needed, and they couldn’t ask for anything more.

Or so they had believed.

It was true that the children had food, warmth, and shelter. They had lived in what practically amounted to a King's royal palace, enjoying decadent feasts for every meal.

Each of them was assigned their own Guardians, who were at their beck and call. The Guardians were kind to them, too, abiding by their absurd requests and juvenile rules that could change by the minute. They even had the occasional luxury of rare Sinatra records, which arrived at their doorstep in unmarked parcels.

Still, the children grew up wanting more. There may not be many material things that they could desire, but what other kids out there had seemed out of their reach. For one, they wanted a Mother or a Father to love them as they had read in books, but were told not to wonder about them. They had the Guardians, after all. The Guardians’ presence was permanent (albeit interchangeable) and better than anything that their parents could ever offer them.

Yet the children always felt that something was missing from their perfect lives. Many years passed before they realised that what the Guardians showed them throughout their lives was simply deference, never affection. It seemed as though they existed simply to give the children all they wanted, if only to make sure they wander no further than their backyard.

"There's nothing out there," one of the Guardians said to Minor with a smile, when the youngest child kept at her questions about what was beyond the trees. "Keep running and you might just fall off the edge of the world."

Of course, none of the children believed that. Not even little Minor, who still believed in magical sprites leaving presents in her stockings at the end of a good year. Weren't they taught at a young age to never trust what they couldn't prove? They all knew that there was certainly a bigger world out there, perhaps even a better one, for the Guardians gave no evidence pointing to the contrary.

But the children nodded anyway, unsure of what they could and would do, even if it was true. Where were they going to find the courage to face the unknown when they knew so little? And so they never sought to venture further, despite how they were often left alone.

They did not choose this solitude.

No child would.

But the Guardians had made concerted efforts to keep the children apart, filling the house with rumours and half-truths that made them wary of each other. They came up with distinctive daily schedules for the quintet too, replete with complex studies on a variety of subjects, no matter where their interests lie.

Each day, they learnt mathematics too advanced for their tender age, complex scientific concepts, and more languages that they needed to know. They learnt how to make weapons out of scraps and hold their breath in deep pools.

More often than anything else, they were asked to put their inborn capabilities on display with no holds barred and challenge just how much they could do.

Sometimes, they got hurt. They would be allowed to heal in the sick bay in solitude, save for the watchful eyes of the Guardians. Their rest was cut short as soon as they were physically well enough to get back in the game.

When any of the children wondered aloud just what they were preparing for, the Guardians would go out of their way to avoid giving the tiniest of clues.

Why don't we focus on getting this right?

Perhaps you will find out on your own in due time.

The evasive replies only left the children more troubled, weighed down by more questions than before.

Of the endless boundaries that went unchallenged, it seemed as though they had been imprisoned for an unknown crime with no chance of parole in sight. Perhaps, their birth was their crime, for which there would be no respite, only moments of solace.

Those the children took in the few common hours that they shared. These include meal times, the last of which was followed by an hour of mandated reading.

There were no rules against speaking, even at the library. Still, there was never much to say. They did not even know themselves, where they came from or why they were taken away. Much less did they know one another, known only by their aliases.

The eldest went by the name of Salvo. He was tall, reaching almost seven feet by the age of seventeen. He was the only one who knew about the wine bottles that were hidden on top of the bookshelves. He also had heterochromia iridis, which made his eyes brown and a pretty shade of emerald green.

The large boy was mostly harmless, so long as he was left alone to his own devices. Everyone knew about his temperamental half that occasionally escaped from his grasp. The last time he flared up from his sibling's snarky

comment, it took three Guardians to stop him from thrashing every last bit of the furniture he could see.

What most of the children had not known was that his hot temper once proved fatal for the first of their Guardians. It was close to fourteen years ago when the Guardian's body had been found, so no one really talked about it anymore, except behind closed doors.

Rumour has it that she was seen lying upon a pool of spilt milk, white swirling in carmine. Her body had been riddled with bullets from a gun that was never found. The Guardian was soon replaced, as though she never once existed. Her death was forgotten by all but Minor.

Minor had seen it all. In fact, she would have sworn that she saw Salvo's fingers smoulder as he smirked in his booster seat. But she learnt to keep that to herself when she saw the glimmer of threat in the young toddler, his face bright with glee.

That was not the last time Minor saw Salvo's lethal ability, though she never let loose the secret that haunted her. But for many years, she did her best to stay away from him. Not that she needed to. No one ever noticed her anyway. She had been born small. She was no taller than a child's thumb and remained so even in her teens.

Even when she died young at The Engineer's feet.

The Engineer tried to convince himself that it had been nothing more than his imagination. Yet he was certain that he had heard an itsy scream, following the soft crunch of his heavy boot. When he lifted his foot, he saw his sister crushed flat on his sole.

In his panic, he flicked her tiny corpse off onto the carpet. He dared not say a word as he watched her float up in The Guardian's Hoover and into the vacuum bag.

Nightmares haunted him as faceless ghosts called him a murderer in his

sleep. Their shouts turned into whispers during his waking moments, driving him almost mad.

It was rather fortunate that his innate talent laid at the workings of the mind, even his own. A tweaked memory here and there, the Engineer became certain that he had just three siblings all along, no more than that.

Veritas knew the truth. She always did, whether it was Salvo’s murder and Minor’s cowardice. It enraged her. She even knew about the Engineer’s manslaughter and subsequent manipulation of his own memories, though she had not seen either happen. Not with her eyes, only her mind.

No one ever wanted to listen to her revelations. She tried slipping in a line or two during their reading hour, but her honesty was never welcome. She was simply shunned by most of them. Perhaps sometimes, the truth was better off left alone.

Only Pyre revelled in sharing the truth. In the few moments he had with Veritas, he wanted to hear everything that she had to say. He enjoyed knowing the whole truth, while he had much to be honest about.

She listened to him in return, occasionally murmuring her assents and disagreements between lines in her favourite fantasy novels. That was how she learnt of his big plans and nodded along, even if she did not quite agree at all.

“Perhaps you should rethink your plans, Pyre,” she said a beat after he was done, worry creasing her thin brows. “It just doesn't seem right, playing God for others. You might be the only one who wants this.”

“Well, don’t you?”

Veritas lowered her head and averted her eyes. The silence lasted for a long while, and as they dwelled in it, Pyre began to fear that he might no longer have someone to talk to.

"Don’t worry, Veri,” he finally said. “Bravery doesn’t come that easy. It's just a thought, you know.”

Veritas let out a sigh and she replied with what looked like relief on her face, "It'd better be.”

“As you wish.”

“They're not like us, you know. They love this place, as much as they question it sometimes.”

As she said those words, she sneaked a peek at their siblings. They were oblivious to their conspiratorial whispers, absorbed in their fictional paradise. The Engineer even had a silly grin on his face, as though he had it all figured out, whatever *it* is.

Pyre watched as Veritas’ grey eyes wandered and decided that his sister would never agree with him. No one would. She was purity, and he, chaos, he once overheard a Guardian say. He had to distract her or she would only get in his way.

"It's just so dull in here. This place could do with something a little... you know, brighter."

He snapped two of his slender fingers and let a small flame flicker at their tips. It wavered as his thoughts did. He was never good at lying and he prayed that his sister wouldn’t notice his tells. He traced a smile in the air. Smoke lingered in place of the fire.

Veritas smiled back at the charming act. But that was all it was – an act. Trust failed Veritas as the truth escaped her for once in her short life.

It wasn’t Pyre’s intention to lie to the only person who had ever believed in him, at least not in the beginning. When Veritas divulged what she knew of their family, he did think twice about what she had said.

In fact, he was almost convinced that she might be right. Escape could very well be his wish and his alone. His dear siblings might not want the same

thing that he had always dreamt of. Even Veritas might have enjoyed the bliss of feigned ignorance, however long it lasted.

But then, Pyre remembered the angry red scars on Veritas' wrists. The wounds had not had the time to fade, while her, the energy to hide.

It wasn't just her too. He saw the sadness and guilt in the eyes of Salvo that mirrored the Engineer's. There was so much hurt that he could feel burning within them. He knew they had to want the same thing that he did.

Thinking back at his young self in his cot, he saw the freedom he never had.

Stolen.

He never had a choice.

Tears fell and he wiped them off before anyone could see.

It didn't matter what the Guardians were preparing them for, or that they might have saved him from the abuse that would have rained upon his unnatural abilities. It didn't even matter if they were trying to make him better than he was ever going to be.

The Guardians were criminal thieves.

He wondered about the "if only"s that they had robbed of him – if only he had been raised in his ordinary home by his ordinary parents, only dreaming of being extraordinary and never knowing the true cost of being so.

What a life it was to live for someone else, but himself. What a dream.

Let's all start over, together. The thought left him just as he snapped his fingers, much harder this time, and let the embers consume their pain.

Learning to Survive

Her name was Kara. She was seven years old.

These are trivial details, she reminded herself. *Details that don't matter in the end.*

If she were to live each day with certainty only for the next, she needed to let these trinkets loose. These days, there was only room for the things that would keep her alive.

Kara. No one would ever call her by that name again anyway. Not her mother, whom she had never met. Not Dad either.

It had been a long time since he had left the little girl alone in the woods. Kara held back her tears. She was angry, though not at him. *(He didn't mean to do it, did he?)* She was mad at herself for being prisoner to her memories. These thoughts were meaningless. They only brought her grief and nothing more.

Still, she could not help but think of her father. He was once the only constant in her life. He taught her how to hunt by the age of four. He told her everyday about her mother whom she believed to be living in her heart. He loved her and cared for her, that much she was sure.

She remembered every moment of those last days they shared. It was her first vacation out of the country.

"We're going on a new adventure!" Her father had teased. "This time tomorrow, we'll be far away from our backyard and the woods in our hometown!"

She was grinning the whole ride there, in the air and over the waters, to the place she couldn't name. On the boat, she chattered on about how she excited she was to set up camp on a faraway island. It would just be the two of them soon as the boatman left. What better company could she ever ask for?

“Ready to see the waterfalls?”

Kara jumped with a little squeal of assent. Her father pulled out a creased map and led her through the forest.

It was a good day. The cicadas sang, as did the songbirds. Above the beautiful sounds of nature, her father read out names of places that she had never heard of before. She didn’t care to learn about them for surely, Dad knew best. There was composure in his words and assurance in his callused grip on her tiny hand.

The child skipped along, though her excitement did not last long. She was soon scratching at her skin that glowed red from insect bites and the heat.

“Are we there yet, Dad?”

“No, sweetheart, we have a way to go,” he had said.

They went deeper and deeper into the woods. It seemed that they were never going to stop walking. Her father fiddled with his phone and pointed it to the skies. When he saw Kara tilt her head in confusion, he smiled and did a silly dance, making his little girl laugh for the first time in hours.

As the sun began to set, they set up camp somewhere non-descript. The weather had cooled down by now. Kara did not feel any better. Her father had tried to keep up the façade that they were right where they were supposed to be. By then, she had already learnt what it meant to be lost.

On the second day, Kara woke up early. She watched her father slip out of the tent, and caught his sleeve before he could leave.

“Where are you going, Dad?”

“Stay, Kara. I’ll just be a moment. I’ve got to take a look at where we are.”

“Can’t I come?”

“Look, it’ll only take a moment.”

Kara scrunched her face up and let go of her father's shirt. He smiled at her and grabbed her shoulders, "Look, I will come back, I promise."

"What if you don't?"

Her father hesitated. It was only a second, but Kara caught it. She started to tear.

He kissed her cheek, reassuring his only child, "I always do."

Every bit remained as vivid as though it had just been yesterday. She remembered every second she had spent in the darkness, waiting for him to come back. She kept reliving their last moments together, afraid that she had missed something. She could still feel the warmth of his large hands on her face. His face softened into a blur in her memory.

"You've always looked more like your mother," he used to say.

She didn't even know what she looked like, save for a faded photograph that she didn't have on her. She brushed the thought away as she stepped out of the tent, almost soundless save for a soft creak for her sharp ears. Her hunting knife glistened in the sun.

She sharpened the knife on the only bald tree in proximity, by which lay a scant supply of firewood. That went on her to-do list. Food came first. Her stomach was rumbling. She had come up empty for the past few days. She almost had a deer yesterday, but the knife barely scathed it during its quick escape.

Today might be her last chance. The day was already starting to feel too heavy for her.

Before making her way out, she looked around. Vigilant eyes scanned every corner on the ground and each treetop.

Silence.

Her left hand clawed into the mud and her right with her father’s bow in her grip sunk right beside. After sweeping some leaves off her clothes, she stood as still as she could. Strings on the bow tautened like that of a trained archer.

Silence permeated the air. It used to comfort her, but now, the absence of life unsettled her. She was a lone prey, weak and easy.

She treaded light and stopped as soon as the leaves started to crackle. Just yesterday she had been a diminutive child. Now, her larger feet felt too harsh upon the foliage.

She made no more than two steps. Her heavy breath was the only sound she heard, until…

By instinct, she turned back and got ready to run. Soft hands wrapped tight around her bow and arrow. But she started to breathe easy upon seeing what had been on her trail. Her arms dropped to her side as she let out a sigh, loosening the grip on her weapon.

The lone fledging pointed his head up at her and lets out a squawk in return. A big one for him.

You and me both.

He wobbled unsteadily. Her smile lasted not more than two seconds. She looked away, her arms already returned to a steady hunter’s stance. There was no time for indolence. Every second passed was a part of her lost. All these years would have been for nothing. In those words, in her instinct, a morsel of hope for her father’s return remained.

She moved on further into the woods. It was the furthest she had ever been and the most fearful she had ever felt. Desperation kept her moving forward as she could feel her heart do the same in its hollow nest.

Footsteps followed her. A larger animal treaded on the ground, meters away from her.

She took a deep breath and turned back, arms raised parallel to her line of sight.

The arrow swooshed without hesitation.

And it sank.

Deep.

With what little energy she had left, she lifted her tired feet, one after the other, running to her kill. Her smile widened as she tugged at the arrow lodged right between the eyes of her dinner. *On first try!* She prided herself on that.

This time, she ate it raw on the spot. Hunger made her unwilling to leave any of it for home. But the experience of being ravenous for the past days reminded her to save portions. Pushing the meat into her bag, she retraced her steps.

Rocks scrapped against the thickened skin on her feet. Trees towered over her, but sweat still rolled down her cheeks. She did not remember going this far into the woods. Yet disorientation was the least of her worries. The raw meal left a churning feeling in her stomach and she emptied some by a log.

What a waste!

Still, she kept going.

Neither her marked tree nor her trap door was in sight. Everything that surrounded her began to look unfamiliar. Strange sounds that she had never heard before greeted her on a path that looked like flattened rocks. Decorating its edges were broken branches.

She recognised the signs. Someone was here. Not an animal, but a person.

When was the last time she had met anyone at all in this god-forsaken place?

She remembered clearly enough. It had only been a few days after her dad went missing. Regrettably, the ignorant child greeted her only hope with an arrow. Oddly enough, she remembered his face. She remembered his eyes in that moment of agony, right when her newfound weapon struck him.

She remembered his name. Don. It was the only thing she had learnt about him in his feverish last moments. It took her a week to dig a hole that was deep enough for his body, and in that time, he quietly decayed without a word to offer as to why he had been there in the first place. In his pockets, she had found the knife that she now held tight.

Leaves rustled. Boots trampled upon dead grass.

She held the knife up and screamed. The silver light bounced off the startled face of an old man, who jumped and put both hands up in the air.

“Put that down, kid!” He shouted over the sound of a droning hum, before getting a closer look at his would-be attacker.

Then he lowered his voice, moved his hands away from his belt, and stared back at the unresponsive little girl. His crooked nose sniffled at the child caked in dirt and covered in rags.

“What are you doing there? Where are your parents?”

She did not answer him and instead kept on observing him. He had on Don’s jacket, pants, and badge, the former two in a much larger size than she remembered them to be.

Something thrummed in her ears. She gradually recognised the quickened pace of her own heartbeat as she tightened the grip on the only weapon she had.

The Neighbours

The neighbours were at it again. God knew what *it* might be.

Their knocking persisted despite Leo's venomous protests. The noise came at intervals, slowing down and speeding up, without a rhythm to get used to. It had been a whole hour since it began, and there was no sign of it going away any time soon.

With as much strength and frustration as he could gather, he knocked back on his wall. His fist hurt. *Worth it,* he thought when a brief moment of silence descended upon the still room. Then, the sound only grew louder when it began again.

Leo imagined a worn hammer on a botched carpentry project. Carpentry at 2 in the bloody morning; what were the odds? He groaned and pressed his ears against his pillow that barely muffled the noise. His duvet failed to stifle the sound.

"For God's sake," Leo heard his father rumble nearby as he hid under his sheets.

Dad had entered his bedroom and was now shouting at the wall, "Please, we're trying to sleep here!"

Rare enough, his words were a verbatim statement of the child's thoughts. Leo finally lifted his sheets and saw Dad's annoyance written all over his face.

"Those grown-ups should know better huh, kid?"

Leo chuckled, knowing that was about all the humour he was ever going to get from the big man. Without another word, his father exaggerated a shrug. He walked away from the door and went further down the hallway.

The knocks continued.

The demon theory might have held on at the age when Leo had still been afraid of monsters in his closet. But he was older now. Eleven was the age was when there had to be a rational explanation for everything.

Eleven also happened to be when the first signs of becoming a teenager erupted in small bursts as his anger took over the helms from irrational fear.

Leo got off his bed. Draping his coat on, he trudged down the hallway.

"Daddy, I can't sleep."

"Why don't you go over and see what's happening, kiddo?"
"By myself?"

"Well, you know Mr and Mrs Lam," the man said, without looking up from his work. "And you're practically a teenager, aren't you?"

Leo was two years away from his teenage years, but he didn't correct his father. He knew that his father stopped caring about these trivial matters a long time ago.

His father's work had always been more important than anything else. That was what his mother had said, in tears, before she left for good all those years ago.

"Sure, dad", Leo muttered.

His father only nodded, as though it was perfectly fine for a child to wander about in the middle of the night.

On his way to the front door, Leo stepped on a research paper amongst a trail of unfinished manuscripts, a right mess courtesy of his father's occupational hazard – or way to escape.

He cursed and smiled when he got away with it.

The night was cold.

Leo rang the doorbell, preparing his best polite façade. He tried on a massive grin, in an attempt to hide his annoyance for the reason behind his standing in the cold. Keeping it on was proving to be a feat at 2 a.m. in the unyielding wind.

As he rubbed his hands to keep himself warm, he caught the reflection of an incompetent actor on the glass window. He consciously withdrew his unnatural smile, breathing out icy mist before he knocked on the door.

“Hello? Is anybody home? ”

There was no answer. He knocked again.

“Mr Lam? It’s me, Leo!”

Silence returned.

Discomfort crawled under his skin as he fidgeted. There was no shadow behind the hole, yet he had a bad feeling that someone was watching him. He prayed that no one had heard him curse behind that glass peephole.

Time to head back, he thought. *The knocks had probably stopped in the time I was here anyway.*

Maybe his fuss had been uncalled for in the first place. After all, hadn’t his neighbours looked the other way during the rare moments when he had thrown a loud tantrum at his dad? Why couldn’t he offer the same patience in return?

Moreover, the dark lonely apartment was starting to look ominous. It didn’t feel right to venture further, even if he felt braver than he had any right to for his stature.

He started for home.

Only curiosity stopped him in his steps. He began to think as he started to turn back, *why didn't they answer the door?*

God, what if they are in danger?

Surely not, this was a safe neighbourhood.

But it wouldn’t hurt to at least find out what they’ve been up to? All that knocking couldn’t have been nothing. Perhaps they would even be thankful for his concern.

If Leo had taken heed of the movies, he would have kept his head down and made his way home. But, hell, eleven was the age when one knowingly approached trouble for the sake of stories to share in the morning.

The unsatisfied child in him walked around the Lam residence and found a back door to their kitchen. They had not bolted it, thanks to the confidence that only a small trusting town could possess. *This was all too easy.*

It wasn’t right, but Leo got bolder, even as the door warned against his intrusion with its deafening creaking.

Leo never knew the Lam family well. He and his father were self-confessed recluses, while the Lams have not exactly been the friendly neighbours.

Sure, they talked sometimes. They knew each other's last names (or at least, Leo and his dad did). But it was only mere greetings that they exchanged, while the number of times they had said hello could be counted on a single hand, despite them having moved in for almost a year.

Now, Leo got to know them a little more. Well, sort of. Eleven was when knowing a few things allowed one to proclaim that they knew the world.

For one, the Lams were freaks, perhaps compulsive to a point. The kitchen was almost too organised to have been used in the past few days. Carpets had been thoroughly vacuumed. The furniture looked clean at a distance. Stacks of magazines were left neat without as much as a crinkle.

All but the living room sofa looked like props of an estate agent, looking to flip the apartment. Leo sat down on the grey sofa and imagined having to live in this place. What an odd albeit somehow comforting contrast to his own haphazard home.

A faint knocking rhythm interrupted his thought. He was suddenly reminded of what he was here for, and how he shouldn’t be.

He got up unwillingly and headed up the creaking stairs as he cringed at each minute sound. As he got closer, he was glad that the knocking had not stopped; at least he had a reason to be here asking questions.

Then, it dawned on him that a grown-up would see little reason for him to be *in* here at all. The police would have been a far better option. A false alarm or an overreaction, possibly, but a more legal option nonetheless.

Reaching into his back pocket, Leo realised that his phone was not with him. He must have left it in his bedroom. Damn his hotheaded self. He cursed at his idiocy before noticing just how warm the cold air had gotten.

Screw it. He was already here, wasn't he? He decided to make his presence known.

"Mr Lam, you there? It's Leo."

Silly – they might not even know his name.

He quickly added, "From next door! Sorry I invited myself in. Just wanted to see if everything was okay!"

There was no reply.

And so he kept walking. The loud knocks came at erratic rhythms, making his every step negligible. Fear surged as soon as it had surfaced. Turning back seemed like a good idea. Yet eleven was the age that looked down on good ideas.

"Hello?"

He only heard his heartbeat quicken in reply, full of trepidation and uncertainty. It was throbbing as loudly as the rhythmic knocks had pounded against his wall.

Sweat cascaded off his forehead. He was now close to the answers to his mystery and that had to put an end to his irrational fears. The door to the Lams' master bedroom was ajar. He continued his streak of foolishness as his hand reached for the knob.

"I'm just gonna come in now."

The door opened wide with a screech. Leo tried steadying himself as the bitter smell tore in his direction.

"What the hell's that smell?" he asked no one in particular in a voice all too loud.

He saw that the room was darker than he had thought it would be. It was bathed in the glow of candle lights, though he could spot no candles in sight.

His eyes adjusted to the red on the walls. He had assumed it was paint at first. But now, it looked almost too bright. And solid.

Soon as he figured out what it was, the boy screamed.

“Mr Lam!”

His neighbour had stopped kicking at the wall soon as he saw Leo came in. His tired eyes looked up at his hope, dashed as that of an eleven-year-old met his.

Leo could feel his own body quaking as he tried to make out what he was seeing. The half-corpse was swinging from the ceiling. A large patch of his skin hung loose, his back suspended by meat hooks above.

Then, Leo looked from Mr Lam to the right – at the other swaying shadow at the corner of his eyes. A woman was hanging on more meat hooks next to him. She did not look much like Mrs Lam, at least not the one that Leo knew. Her eyes were much wider, for one.

Leo recalled, despite his giddy head, that he had seen the woman on the Lams' driveway when the Missus was away. Her blood now wastefully stained the carpet.

"I... I'm going to get help!"

They did not reply with words. Both their mouths were wrapped with duct tape as were their bare feet, the source of the knocking turned more dreadful at the sight.

Leo's feet edged towards the limp body of Mr Lam, unsure of what he should and could do. He looked towards the door, perhaps hoping someone else would come through. No hope there. He was the only saviour that night.

"Let me…"

Leo reached out with a trembling hand and pulled the duct tape off Mr Lam's mouth. The old man gasped at the sudden motion as the skin beside his mouth tore. His tongue lolled out as his pink drool trickled to the floor.

Leo screamed.

"Oh my god, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

His panicked apologies got a slight reaction from Mr Lam's mistress, as though she had only just realised the child's presence in the room. Her eyes widened. She was staring at something behind him, beckoning him to look the same way with nothing more than her wordless moans.

Leo turned around. His eyes immediately landed upon the blood-stained knife on the dressing table. *Thank God.* He reached for it without hesitation.

“Alright I’ve got it, I’ve got it!”

Leo moved towards the woman. Just as he was about to cut through her bonds, he noticed that she was still staring behind him. This time, she was able to muster a little strength to nod her head upward and groan even louder.

Leo gradually turned his head, his heart threatening to stop. He could see a dark shadow hanging right over him. It was moving closer to where he was. He hazarded a guess where the sudden warmth had come from.

Someone was breathing.

Near him.

Leo's eyes followed the woman’s trail of blood and noticed that it had traced up, up, and up to the ceiling. He craned his neck slowly as he found two eyes looking into his.

He fell back in horror, knife clanging onto the floor.

The pale creature hissed, spitting blood at the frightened boy. Vivid thin veins surrounded its bright red pupils. It stretched its jaw that creaked.

It couldn't be… could it?

Lying on the floor unmoving, Leo tried to make sense of what he had seen. He couldn’t remember what to call it, but he thought about everything he knew about destroying *it* – crucifixes, holy water, and the bible verses that he never learnt a word of.

Oh God. He wished his family had been religious.

"Ah, a young saviour. I was beginning to think I could get away with this," *it* interrupted his thoughts with an all-too-human voice and a crimson smile that was far too wide for its face.

Right out of fiction books and movies, the word came to Leo. What the creature was finally registered in his eleven-year-old mind, which will soon remain eleven, forever and ever.

Bedtime Monsters

Reid had always known he was different ever since he turned two. He had never found a real want or reason to smile, even when his parents tried to tickle him pink. Nor did he scream and cry for attention, as the other children on the playground did. Instead, he found comfort in silence and solitude, as though in an endless game of hide-and-seek.

When Reid turned five, he went to school for the first time. There were neither tears nor hesitation, much to his parents' surprise. He simply let go of his mother's hand and walked right in. For the rest of the morning, he chose to keep to himself and shunned the children around him.

He tried his very best to be unnoticed on the oddest day of his life, though he could not help trembling. The first teacher whom he ever met – Teacher Sam – ordered them to sit in circles on soft, coloured mats.

He did, though he was uncertain of what was happening. The rest of the children did too. They did not seem to be the very least baffled. Soon, Teacher Sam began to sing silly rhymes over and over again, beckoning them to sing along with her, as though she had felt lonely in her act.

An hour later, a different teacher stepped in to take her place. She called herself Teacher Fiona. She then gave him a piece of paper and told him to scratch his blue crayon within the lines. He did not understand why. He threw the crayon on the floor and frowned at the broken pieces.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, handing him candy and stickers to cheer him up.

That was when he burst into tears for the first time that day.

Everything was wrong, he thought. *Nothing will ever be right again.*

All he wanted in that moment was to be home and left alone.

His tears had dried by the time they were led to the sandpit for playtime. He sat by himself on a plastic rock, watching some of the children hop across chalk-drawn boxes. Their rhythmic leaps calmed him.

He was distracted by a shadow looming near him. A young girl had skipped up to him and was tugging at his shirt.

When he looked up, she said with a smile, “I’m Jen. Would you like to play with me?”

He stared at little Jen in silence, willing her to go away. She only reached for his hand. No one had ever done that before but his own mother. He hated to be touched.

“Go away!” he screamed.

He kicked the child in the shin. He slammed his fist into her face after she fell, till she broke her front tooth and bled all over the floor.

Other children had begun to crowd around. Some bawled at the sight of blood. Adults rushed towards them, the pair of teachers he knew and some others whom he did not.

Teacher Sam took Jen to the nurse, not before looking at him disapprovingly. Teacher Fiona dragged Reid aside by the shoulder and yelled at him. Reid had no idea what he had done wrong and only furrowed his brows.

Another stranger then took him to the principal’s office and made him sit on a bench outside.

“Wait here,” the man said.

That, Reid understood. While he waited, he heard several noises blend into one. There were sirens, shouts, a bigger commotion, and then nothing at all. A woman half-ran into the office and slammed the door behind her, not giving Reid a second look.

It felt like days before he saw his father stomp into the hallway. He had a briefcase in one hand and his phone in the other. His dark hair was unkempt.

His face was cherry red as he almost shouted, "What do you mean you can’t take time off? He's YOUR son too!”

Reid noticed an orange food stain on his father’s white shirt that had been fresh just this morning. His father was now looking at him as he softened his tone, “He’s here. Fine, we'll talk tonight."

Ending the call, he crouched to the height of his boy. He sighed as though not knowing what to say, before finding the only words he could, “Oh, Reid.”

“She shouldn’t have touched me.”

It only made his father sigh again.

“Wait here, alright? We’ll talk later.”

“Okay,” Reid nodded.

His father managed a false crooked smile that vanished soon as he walked into the principal's office. Jen's mother was already there.
“First day of school and seven fucking stitches on her eye. Your son is a hoodlum!" she screamed before the door could close. “He needs to go to prison, that's what's going to happen!”

Left out in the hallway, Reid heard everything. There were his father's repeated apologies, while the principal insisted how "the boy will be punished" and how they both called him "special".

Reid wondered if the TV might have been lying to him. Perhaps being special wasn't such a good thing at all. When they came out of the office, they made Reid apologise to Jen’s mother.

“I’m sorry that she touched me,” the young boy said.

Her eyes grew wide open as she shrieked words that he did not understand and stomped off in anger.

“Did I say something wrong?”

His father looked at the child and only took his hand, leading him out of the school and into their car. Father did not say a word during the drive home. Reid shuffled uncomfortably, before breaking the silence in his place.

"Where's Mummy?"

"She's working."

“Oh.”

Reid then stayed silent to hide his resentment. He could not understand why she never took time off to see him. His father did, every time. It was as though she had willingly taken up every day and night shift there was, avoiding him like the plague.

Perhaps his father had read his thoughts as he too, fell silent. When they were closing in on home, he pulled over by the road and looked at the child, who kept his eyes on his tiny shoes.

"You really hurt Jen, you know."

“She wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“All she wanted was to be friends with you.”

“I don’t need friends.”

His father let out a soft sigh. He hesitated, as though finding the right words.

“Reid, you can’t hurt people just because you feel bad. It isn’t right," he lowered his voice to a whisper. "And you have to learn to fit in. You're different and I love you for it, but the world doesn't take that too kindly.”
He held back his arguments and gave a tiny nod, knowing that was what his father needed to see.

The next day, Reid did not go to school.

He was told he didn’t have to go there anymore.

Instead, his father took him to the doctors, even though he wasn’t ill. They asked him questions that he did not understand. They then left him in the room full of blocks and beads, watching him play through the glass window as they speak in hushed tones.

He hated it, being watched like a lab rat, as though something was wrong with him. If being different was a mistake, then he wished he was just like everyone else.

That night, his father tucked him in and saw him cry.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said.

His father kissed him, tears gleaming in his own eyes, “It is what it is, and we learn to live with it.”

It was the first and last time Reid ever went to the doctors. Taken out of school, he began to learn from his father, who taught him lessons beyond words and numbers. He took his father's word as gospel, knowing that it would help him survive.

At the playgrounds, he started to mirror what he had observed in others. He got quite good at that. He learnt to behave like the well-liked ones, even if he never quite understood their specious acts.

His two years of homeschooling was the perfect boot camp. He learnt to tell his father things that he wanted to hear. The year he turned seven, his father put him back in public school. Reid thought he just might fit in after all.

He went to school on time, handed in his assignments, and clenched his fists when they called him “freak” or “psycho”. He never retaliated, knowing that he could hurt them. *Really* hurt them, more than he had hurt Jen.

At the end of every school day, he would run straight home, even if he had to trip over a few shoes. But he soon realised that no matter how well he smiled or said please, the others could always tell that he was just not the same.

Months later, he chose not to try anymore. He decided to lead a quiet life like an invisible, insignificant speck. Sometimes, he stared at them, imagining the cruelty he could let loose with just a shove. Most of the time, he kept to himself, just as his father told him not to.

It worked just as well as he had wanted. Even the worst of the bullies had stopped looking his way by the end of the year. They simply ignored him. Between classes and recesses, he existed like coarse sand shoved aside for castles, kicked down to make way.

It wasn't always easy to be lonely. No one knew who he truly was, what he liked, and what he hated.

Reid was eight years old today. He liked yellow cereal, chain puzzles, old films that flicker, and black crows. He hated many things, like smiling, greeting, and waving. Most other things, in fact. He never told anyone that, because he was never asked. He preferred it this way.

His father had forgotten his birthday. He wondered why his father seemed

to care less about him each day. Perhaps Reid had flared up once too often. Temper got the best of him these days and he just could not help it. Now, his father barely spoke to him anymore.

Especially since he found Reid's little experiment in his drawer. He never meant for his father to find the tiny specimen, but he should have thought about the smell. That was his mistake.

Reid had never seen his father so furious before. He hit his son for the first time as Reid felt his fury burn on his face.

“It was a life, Reid! A life!”

But it wasn’t. Reid tried to explain that it was just roadkill that he had come upon. He would never take a life, especially not that of an animal. All he had only wanted to know was what was on the inside. His father would not listen.

It was as though something broke in the old man that day. He had never been the same since. The only time he would even acknowledge his child's presence was in the middle of the night.

His shirt always smelled of alcohol and sometimes, sick. That was how Reid knew it was him without opening his eyes. Without fail, he would slur something incomprehensible by Reid's ear, before he slammed the door behind him. He did the same tonight before retreating to the living room.

Reid always knew when his mother came home. That was when the screaming would start. They would yell about money, sometimes about the child they had.

“You should've brought him to the doctors, instead of teaching him to smile like a freak!”

“And where would you get the money for that?”

“If you would look for a fucking job, maybe I wouldn't be paying all the fucking bills in this fucking house!”

Reid pulled the quilt up to his knees and listened in. Glass broke. It could be the kitchen mugs. Perhaps it had been one of late Grandma’s antiques. Or the already shattered television screen.

Someone had pushed the rocking chair over. Something had slammed against the walls. Reid would find out exactly whom and what the very next day. He would then head past the mess and walk on to school. He, like his parents, would pretend nothing had happened at all.

For now, he chose to imagine his answers behind closed doors. Each passing moment left him feeling angrier, more bitter and sad. His eyes set on his bedroom door, as though sheer willpower could radiate force sufficient enough to keep it closed. It hardly ever opened. Still, he felt fear that chaos would catch up to him.

That was when he noticed something in the shadows.

The creature instinctively slid through the drawers and onto his bed. It coiled around Reid’s arm, then slithered up to his neck. He looked at the eccentric animal gliding on his skin. It looked back at him with reflective sad eyes and a soft whimper.

"What are you?"

It did not answer and likely, could not. It had no mouth that Reid could spot. It had two little feelers for eyes and a body slightly smaller than a full-grown pug. Huge olive scales covered most of its back. The least of its unprotected skin was where its limbs popped from when it did not feel like gliding on the floors.

Honestly, it looked quite terrifying, so it had tried its very best to avoid making any contact with people. It knew how Man was known to fear things that appeared too different.

Not Reid. He did not fear it. He found a friend where he had expected one least. He loved it. He decided to name it after the only sound it made.

"Hi, Tsa. Nice to meet you."

Tsa repeated its name, as though it liked it just fine.

Tsa came by every night thereafter. He could never keep away from the draw of bad emotions. Anger, bitterness, and sadness lured him like a siren’s call. All of these emotions happened to exactly encapsulate Reid.

Reid had good reason to feel that way. He was the extra seat taken. He was the other pair of shoes that no one questioned. He was the forgotten child, even by the ones whom you think must remember him, having brought him into this world – yet taught him nothing.

“He's your son too!”

“He's not my son. He's a fucking psychopath!”

In many ways, Tsa was like Reid. It was "special" too. For starters, it could not pretend to be human either. It was clear that it had come from somewhere else. It did not talk much, so Reid never knew where. A fact, accepted though unverifiable, was that it was possibly the last of the species.

He never told anyone about Tsa, because he knew that no one could and would understand. He of all people should know that. He swore it to be his little secret, for what is misunderstood is easily denied. He would hate to lose it.

Its company brought some sort of strange comfort. It was stranger still how quickly he got used to its presence. After all, he could never get used to the habitual chaos that sometimes reached him through the doors.

As with how the other children turned to parents when having nightmares of monsters, he sought solace in monsters while having parents for nightmares.

“You were the one who wanted a child!”

“Didn’t you? If I knew that was how you felt, I would have never had him!”

No one asked Reid if he wanted to be here (he didn’t). The screaming stayed between the adults who hated each other and it never ended. It jolted Reid and Tsa awake every night.

But he no longer stared at the door, wishing it would keep him safe. He stopped staring at the teachers in school, wishing they somehow knew. Never again did he gaze at the patrolling police officers, hoping they would take him away.

He knew he would always find comfort in his lair, knowing it was and will always be Tsa and him.

"You get it, don't you?"

Tsa, it responded.

That was the answer Reid was looking for. The child knew right then that he had found a genuine friendship that no one else would ever come close to having.

And so as the boy grew older and older, even when he was all by himself, he never stopped believing in Tsa. He knew that he could never give up on his faith in monsters, simply because he could not believe in anything else.

Cemetery Gates

There is a secret place that lies deep within the forest, where the children sleep through the morning lull and the midday sun. Past the gates of the adult cemetery, we see their tiny silent homes that we call tombs.

It has remained a mostly secret place for several decades since not many have had the cause to learn about it.

From the sand beneath, the children wake at night alone together. After all, no one really sleeps forever. The abandoned children of the damned roam during the late hours, in their putrid shell of dry, hardened skin.

Most people are clueless about the truth of this age-old legend. That is because small corpses have quiet feet, or feet so rotten they can hardly be called feet at all.

Those, who are wise enough to be a little suspicious, will claim that they have never seen it with their own two eyes. Even if they had, they will always choose not to believe themselves. Wild imagination, they will say. Indeed, human beings are more often than not, cynics at heart.

But believe it or not, the dead children walk. When the moon hangs high and the time comes, he rises.

She rises, too.

They all rise and yawn as stale breath fills the air. There is no describing the terrible stench that follows. A sharp ear can even hear their tiny jaws creak, as door hinges of old homes often do.

This night, as always, Samuel climbs out of his plot. He is now slow and sluggish, just like his (also) late Gramps. His bones make an unsettling cracking noise as heavy mud slides off them.

The boy is only seven, though to be fair, he has stayed seven for a rather long time. In fact, his death anniversary had coincided with his seventh birthday, much to his dismay. He misses celebrating his life without remembering that it was long gone.

Anna climbs out of her plot too, a little more nimble than the others. She is after all quite new at this. She is much smaller, too. Before long, the fresh face from the morgue has found her place on her headstone. She swings her legs as she suffers in silence, the endless taunts of a dull nickname.

“Good middle-of-the-night, Roadkill,” Samuel says with his exaggerated pitch, exercising his numb tongue and his skeletal grin. “Did you get your nose done?”

Anna responds with what appears to be a disappointing sneer, not quite getting why he had said that. She has yet to notice that her nose has all but fallen off. What dreadful embalmers they hire these days for the sake of saving a coin.

“Who's got your nose?” Samuel continues before breaking into a raucous laugh.

He had expected a good comeback from the usually feisty child. Instead, Anna turns away with a frown on her tiny face. Tonight, the little girl is not in the mood for jokes. There is fear in her eyes, which may be an odd-sounding statement to the living.

What need the dead ever be afraid of?

Aren't they already dead?

There is nothing worse than death, is there?

That goes to show how little you know. Cadavers have more things to be terrified of than you and I. Grave robbers, for instance, send shivers down

their bare vertebrae. Vultures also enjoy pecking at the bones of the dead, moving or otherwise.
For Anna, her fear is far more common, especially amongst fresh corpses.

“I miss home,” she lets her thoughts roll off her tongue easy. “I miss my family and I’m afraid... I’m afraid that they have moved on without me.”

An only child, she has good reasons for her longing. In life, she had been showered with love. She had not just birthdays to celebrate, but anniversaries for every little accomplishment, from her first word to her first hug. She misses every bit of that.

She also hates that her passing had left Mum and Dad grieving and on the verge of separation. They had loved her so much, even as that bright red mess under the guilty wheels of their neighbour's antique Chevy.

How she regretted not listening to Mum – *no playing on the roads!* – a little moment of fun had now turned into a lifetime of endless dread.

The funeral home had put her body back together again as best as they could. Her arms and legs were mangled beyond repair, although they did a rather decent job on her face (except for her nose, that is). Her parents snivelled and sobbed at the sight of their child, barely able to lay their last warm kiss on her coffin window.

Right now, Anna can still feel her parents’ presence, even in their absence.

Love is something that kids like Jude never can understand. No one can blame the child. When he was alive, his skin was constantly blotted with scars and bruises. He had never known a day without pain. Death only brought him relief, never grief.

The last thing he ever saw in his short life was his dear mother smiling with his fresh blood on her new white dress.

“Good riddance,” she had called him. This is the blue-faced child who at present, is sulking on his nearby plot at Anna's maudlin longing.

“Pfft, you'll get over it,” Jude mutters as he scraped the dirt in his rotting nails. “Just like how they will too.”

“He's right, Roadkill,” Samuel nods in assent, his neck squeaking as he does. “I did.”

“But I can't help missing them,” she says, thinking of all the kids who no longer get visits in time to come. “What if I never ever get to see them again? The last time they were here, they talked about leaving each other! What if this *is* the end?”

“Oh Anna, give it a week. Or even a month. I promise you won't miss them again. You might even forget all about them. Just one month and you’ll see.”

Anna begins to snivel, not believing a word. Her parents will never forget her, will they? She is their only daughter, whom they had hugged and kissed every morning since her very first day and sung sweet lullabies to each night. How will they ever get used to never doing that again?

Just then, an idea comes to her in the silence that follows. The question burns at the back of her throat, though it lingers in hesitation at the very last second.

What will they think of her, bold enough to ask such a thing in the short time that she's here? Cardinal rules are rules. Breaking them has consequences, as she had learnt from Jude the first night she awoke. These children are her only friends and family now. What if they never talk to her again?

Well, there are no stupid questions. That was what Ms Gracy had once told her in her favourite English class.

Oh, how she misses school and wonders if her friends still miss her. She has never had to experience loss – not even that of a pet that she was not

allowed to have on account of her allergies – and remains blissfully unaware of how long it might take for someone to forget a loved one.

The question pops back into her mind. What little courage she has, she eventually gathers.

“Have you… ever tried going back out there?”

“For the love of ghouls, no!” Saul, who has been quietly fiddling with withered flowers on his grave, shouts over her, his loose jaw at risk of his sudden motion. “We aren't allowed to wander out of the gates. You know that, Anna!”

Anna stares at the boy, unsure of what to say. Then, she looks down at her feet, and starts to cry. Just seconds later, her face warms and reddens with anger.

She jumps off her headstone and kicks at it, shouting at the top of her dead lungs, “Says who?”

Jude grunts a non-reply.

Saul shakes his head in resignation.

“Says all of us,” Samuel puts his literally boney arm around Anna's purple neck and finally says in a whisper, “Look at us. They might have missed us once, but what would they think of us now?”

“But I…”

“You won’t be the same, Anna!” Samuel interrupts before guilt warms his face.

Anna shuts her mouth, not wanting to admit that Samuel is right. She remembers the first time she saw her body after the incident and how frightened she had been at herself.

She remembers the ghost stories that her father used to tell her. Except that right now, she is the monster in their closets and under their beds.

Tears flow down her cheeks.

“Besides, the gates are locked,” Saul explains. “The caretaker makes sure of that every night before he leaves. Believe me, you aren’t the first to try.”

Samuel stares at Saul with wide eyes, before the latter protests, “Just once, I swear! I was just curious!”

Anna ignores the ensuing argument as she calms down and ponders for a while.

She once talked to a stranger to find her way back to her mother when she was lost. She had also interrupted an adult even though she had been told not to, only to have her uncle respond in delight. Rules *can* be broken if it’s for the greater good.

Besides, what has she got to lose? Even surrounded by her fellow grave mates, she *is* alone. And just because they are afraid, doesn’t mean she has to be.

Just as Samuel is about to tug Saul’s rotting arm off, Anna says in her quiet voice, “I can wake before the caretaker does.”

The children stopped their squabble and looked at her. Saul’s eyes are filled with pity.

“That's unfortunately not how it works, love,” he says as he walks over to Anna and hands her a wilted rose. “There's a time and place for us, and it is never before the caretaker leaves.”

The morning sun peeks out just as he finishes his last words.

“I understand,” Anna takes the rose from him and feigns a pliant smile before she climbs back into her plot.

In the back of her mind, she has already set her mind to breaking the rules.

Right after the children have scattered back to their graves, the soil beneath a headstone begins to move. The sun has barely risen when Anna manages her way out. She adjusts her slack nose before walking towards the cemetery gates.

She looks at the locks with hopeful eyes.

They are… open.

That was much easier than Anna had imagined. The caretaker must have been off to breakfast, lucky her. She does a little dance as her heart does a skip in return.

“I knew I could do it!” she shouts as she looks back to her home for the past months.

“Oh, you’re a clever one,” she mimicks Saul, wishing he is here to see what she has done.

Mostly, she wishes for company, uncertain of the future she has gotten herself into. But worry can wait. She has done what the others had not dared.

She walks on down the road with pride and joy she had not felt in months. She is about to sing a little song when an odd sound stops her in her steps.

Patter, patter.

Anna looks up and gasps as she scutters to the back of a pine tree. There he is, the caretaker, strolling back to the children’s cemetery with breakfast in his hand. The mustard drips from his poorly-made sandwich, but he seems to care little for his stained gloves.

Patter, patter.

His black boots, once grey, tread lightly upon rain puddles where it had rained last night. He whistles a tuneless song, a huge smile on his face as he

looks up to the sunny skies.

Anna shivers, never because of the cold, a million silly excuses racing through her mind.

I couldn't sleep!

I wanted to get some fresh air!

Stupid, stupid, he will never believe her! What good is sleep and breath to the residents of the cemetery? Perhaps she will do better if she just stands really still behind this tree that now feels all too slender.

He is getting closer now, his boots louder on muddy grounds. He looks to the front, right where Anna is standing…

And keeps walking past the trees…

And down the road…

And right past the cemetery gates.

The caretaker has not seen her at all!

Soon as the man had locked the gates, Anna let out a sigh of relief and a trace of a scream she has been holding in. She swears that the man's eyes have gazed into hers. How could he have missed her?

She counts her blessings and walks on. After all, the caretaker might find the disturbed tomb anytime now and come after her. Still, the thought continues to bother her.

As she reaches the main road, she decides to put a theory to test. She sits and waits.

The road to the cemetery is quiet. It takes hours before a red car shows up in the distance.

Anna clears her throat and shouts “HEY” over and over as she waves to the driver frantically, jumping around in the middle of the lane. The car gets closer and closer. She doesn’t move. Instead, she shuts her eyes tight.

You only die once, she thinks.

Then, she opens her eyes just in time to see the headlights coming at her. She screams. The driver shows no alarm. His stare goes right through her, as did his car.

Anna collapses where she had been jumping about. It takes no time before she realises why the children had close to shrieked when she talked about venturing out there. There are some things you just can’t take past the gates.

Samuel is right. She would never be the same. Part of her – the corporeal part – still remains in her tomb. Anna understands what she has become, possibly forever.

What have I done?

She looks down and notices for the first time that she’s flickering.

How will they ever know I’m even here?

She begins to tear again.

The Lost Children

The child grew up on the vacant fairground
With beetles, spiders and a stray grey hound
No one knew his mother who was never around
The workers took him in for the fare of a pound

The child who was born on the fairground
Grew up to love the odd resident clown
His loyal friend never made a sound
But he listened in silence and that's what did count

Then there was the bearded old lady
Some people had told him that she was crazy
But he'd never once seen her act up, now did he
Though the face in her beard did look ghastly

There was so much to see on the fairground
But the boy couldn't help feeling lonely and down
He wanted more than to run and muck around
He wanted to be known; he wanted to be found

He soon dreamt of leaving the fairground
For the rumours of a faraway town
For his strange stories, they will all gather around
Off his cape will come and he will recount

Of the orphans of the forgotten fairground
Who cared not for the riches, romance or renown
All they wanted was their yarn to be heard
For no more than the humble fare of a pound

More at Brimstone Tales

brimstonetales.wordpress.com